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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether ideals and idealism have a role to play in teaching, identifying some ambiguities and problems associated with ideals and arguing that ideals figure importantly in teaching, but they are ideals of character or personhood as much as they are ideals of educational purpose. The first section focuses on the promise and perils of ideals, explaining that while they embody possibilities which the human spirit can generate and provide a source of guidance and courage, they also have the power to develop a momentum of their own and a propensity to lead people to substitute hypothetical goals for real possibilities. The second section discusses inhabitable ideals in teaching, explaining how to reconcile differences in thought about ideals in teaching. The third section examines tenacious humility (an ideal of personhood), suggesting that good teaching can be based on ideals of some kind and that tenacious humility can help teachers hold at bay the tempting lures of ideals, theories, and ideologies while focusing on ideals of character and personhood. The final section concludes by discussing ideals and the practice of teaching. (Contains 16 footnotes.) (SM)

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THE PLACE OF IDEALS IN TEACHING

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Do ideals and idealism have a role to play in teaching? Two quick answers come to mind. The first is that they have no place, or at most a very limited place. According to this line of thinking, teaching is a well-defined occupation with well-defined goals. Our romantic impulses may tell us otherwise. They may lead us to envision teachers as artists and as transformers of the human spirit. However, a critic might argue, teaching is not an artistic endeavor because teachers are not artists, save from the point of view of method and even then only in a metaphorical sense. Unlike painters at their easels, teachers cannot create whatever they wish in the classroom. They are public servants beholden to the public to get a particular job done. Idealism is warranted as a source of motivation, but teachers' ideals had better not take them away from the job itself. According to this point of view, the only ideal teachers should hold is, ideally, that of fulfilling their publicly defined obligations in a responsible and effective manner.

The second answer advances the opposite position. Teachers must have ideals, and their ideals must reach beyond societal expectation. According to this argument, teachers are not bureaucratic functionaries whose only charge is to pass on to the young whatever knowledge and skills the powers-that-be have sanctioned. Teachers do play an important role in socializing students into expected custom and practice. But as teachers, rather than as mere socializers, they also help equip students to think for themselves, to conceive their own ideals and hopes, and to prepare themselves for the task of making tomorrow's world into something other than a tired copy of today's.

Both answers contain truth. Taken as they are, however, the responses polarize

conservative and progressive aspects of teaching that could, in my view, be brought into a working (if not always harmonious) accord. I propose to make a start toward picturing such an accord by identifying some ambiguities and problems associated with ideals. I will argue that ideals figure importantly in teaching, but they are ideals of character or personhood as much as they are ideals of educational purpose.

The Promise and Perils of Ideals

Ideals point to territory beyond the familiar, the known, the previously attainable. They embody possibilities which the human spirit can generate. Even though they may be out of reach, ideals can provide a source of guidance and courage. A teacher whose ideal is for all students to learn, and to enjoy learning, may not need a tap on her shoulder to remind her of how challenging, or perhaps impossible, the ideal is to realize. Nonetheless, the teacher relies upon the ideal to strengthen and to broaden her pedagogical efforts. The ideal helps the teacher identify short-term goals and aims. It provides a wellspring, or source of inspiration, for choosing specific instructional activities and curricular materials -- those which will help her, in her view, move closer toward realizing the ideal of universal student learning in her classroom.

However, some critics would still argue that ideals should have only a limited place in the practice of teaching (if not in other practices, as well). They would emphasize two concerns: (1) the power of ideals to develop a momentum of their own, and (2) their propensity to lead people to substitute hypothetical goals for real possibilities.

For critics in this camp, the fact that ideals can propel people to action is the very reason to be cautious in how we handle and respond to them. Ideals can inspire people on the basis of passion rather than of careful foresight. The emotion and energy ideals trigger

can substitute for a prudent, but determined desire to improve conditions. According to this argument, people do not need to be inspired to act beneficently, as if they were like bulls in need a red flag held under their nose. Instead, human beings need and deserve an education in thoughtfulness. Ideals grow abundantly and easily -- it is not hard to latch onto one, critics might point out -- but thought requires nurturance, care, patience, and commitment. Thought helps us identify and differentiate ideals that are worthy and that can enhance the human condition from those that might lead to harm. History shows what can happen if an ideal embodies injustice in its very form and content. People have been "idealistic" or have cited ideals to excuse harmful treatment of others. Consequently, critics argue, ideals should not be uncaged without prior thought. Otherwise, they might operate uncritically upon the human mind and imagination.

This concern gives rise to a second worry about ideals. People can end up treating ideals as more important than actual human beings. In other words, people might come to prefer the ideal to the real. The ideal is pure, distinct, unadulterated, uncompromised, and untainted. The real is complex, frustrating, unpredictable, opaque, overwhelming in its human variety. As a response, people may privilege the ideal, rather than keeping their vision clear in order to appreciate the needs, the circumstances, and the hopes of others. Eventually, they might come to see only the ideal, with potentially harmful results. In an examination of the virtues and vices of various political ideals and systems, Maurice Merleau-Ponty shows how people can end up defending the ideal of freedom more than they do actual free men and women.[1] They uphold an ideology, a term sometimes closely related to an ideal, and sing its praises, rather than seek harmonious, just relations with their fellow human beings. George Eliot reminds us that "[t]here is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of

direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men."[2] She implies that ideals can isolate and alienate people from others, without their even being aware of the cause.

Critics could argue that the history of education provides abundant examples to bear out their worries. They might spotlight reformist ideals which have generated new programs, plans, and structures for teaching. The reformers tout the new programs as breakthroughs. Many regard the ideals behind them as marvelous, inspiring, even universally applicable. However, argue the critics, the fact that the programs are based in ideals, and in the closely related reformist zeal to change things, produces harmful consequences. In the absence of sober, careful analysis, the ideals and associated programs may be too narrowly conceived. They may not reflect an adequate study of the many factors at play in any specific attempt to improve education.

Lisa Delpit, for example, suggests that a liberal or democratic education centered around student decision-making, initiative, and freedom of expression is splendid -- as an ideal. She contends, however, that the ideal has problematic results for some urban black children.[3] She argues that many such children are already imaginative and adept at self-expression. But many lack skills of reading, writing, numerating, and more, which in Delpit's view should be given sustained attention since these skills are required for access to sources of opportunity and power, access which some proponents of the ideal perhaps inadvertently take for granted. Delpit does not commend a minimalist back-to-the-basics curriculum, which has at times been the staple educational fare for children of the poor. Rather, I read her as calling for careful consideration of local contexts, circumstances, and communities, an approach which she implies can temper otherwise admirable ideals.

Delpit's claims have generated controversy and debate. As she acknowledges, there is evidence that minority youth in the American inner-city can learn foundational skills

while also being challenged with the most liberal, project-, or discussion-oriented instructional approaches.[4] But the issue of concern here is not the virtue of one pedagogical orientation as compared with another. Critics of ideals would draw from Delpit's work, and from that of others who have called for a second look at various reforms, the lesson that ideals may sometimes lead people to overlook vital human concerns.

Michael Oakeshott writes that ideals can have a valuable place in individual lives, spurring people to act better or to strive harder in developing themselves than they otherwise might.[5] However, he argues, ideals can lead to harm when carried uncritically to a social and political level. In some cases, people may wield ideals as if they were weapons, using them to combat the opposition and to mask the exercise of their power and ambition. In other contexts, people may use them to legitimate any number of social and political reforms, in which those who are to be reformed often have little say. "Every moral ideal," Oakeshott cautions, "is potentially an obsession."[6] He suggests that the tragedy of such ideals is that those who act upon them often mean well. They are not operating on the basis of malevolent impulse. But ideals become like the proverbial log in their eye, blinding them to the human realities which their ideals simply pass right over.

Inhabitable Ideals in Teaching

Our discussion seems to have reached an impasse. From one point of view, ideals are problematic. To judge from the historical record, they appear to have caused as much harm as good in human affairs. From another point of view, individuals and societies alike seem to need ideals to motivate and to guide their actions. They cannot live without ideals, without images of a better world.

Christine Korsgaard suggests that such images are built into our human fabric. She speaks of "ideas" we develop about what could be different, with that term rooted (as I interpret it) in a Kantian use of the German word Idee, meaning a picture or image that is generated by reason infused with hope. "It is the most striking fact about human life," she writes,

> that we have values. We think of ways that things could be better, more perfect, and so of course different, than they are; and of ways that we ourselves could be better, more perfect, and so of course different, than we are. Why should this be so? Where do we get these ideas that outstrip the world we experience and seem to call it into question, to render judgment on it, to say that it does not measure up, that it is not what it ought to be? Clearly we do not get them from experience, at least not by any simple route. And it is puzzling too that these ideas of a world different from our own call out to us, telling us that things should be like them rather than the way they are, and that we should make them so.[7]

According to this perspective, ideals or, if you will, images of goodness, seem to spring upon us. They emerge from our very nature as social beings dwelling in more or less imperfect association with others. Nobody can fail to observe societal and individual shortcomings. But nobody can deny, Korsgaard argues, that human beings, time and again, have conceived ideals of a better world and have acted upon them to bring us closer to, rather than farther from, such a world.

Recent research on teaching suggests that many teachers have ideals and that they take them seriously as sources of moral and intellectual guidance.[8] Many teachers talk and act as if it would be impossible to teach without them. Their ideals appear to vary. For some, the ideal boils down to keeping in mind an image of a growing, educated person.

For others, the ideal pinpoints the personal relationship between teacher and student, a relationship perceived as crucial to establishing an environment in which the student can learn and flourish. For some teachers, their ideal centers around notions of human dignity and social justice. Others are animated by the desire to produce caring, compassionate people. For still others, the ideal pivots around a conception of their discipline and of instructional method, and of implementing that conception as best as possible in the school and classroom. According to the research literature, these ideals motivate, guide, strengthen, and encourage teachers to perform their best, in both the short- and the long-run.

The teachers' testimony suggests that ideals do not automatically blind persons to the real. On the contrary, the perspectives revealed in the literature indicate that, at least for some teachers, their ideals derive <u>from</u> paying attention to the real. Their ideals are securely moored to their understanding and knowledge of students and of the promise of education. Posed differently, their ideals take form as they teach, as they come to grips with the terms of the practice and with what it means to be responsible for educating the young. In such cases, idealism and respect for reality reinforce one another. The teachers' respect for reality disciplines their idealism by preventing it from flattening out the complexity of teaching and learning and from overlooking real constraints and real needs. Their ideals, on the other hand, prevent their sense of reality from unilaterally dampening their hope and vision.

Harriet Cuffaro describes ideals not as endpoints but as sources of insight:

> The reality of society -- the reality of exclusion, inequity, repression, violence, and despair -- is far from the ideal. Yet, the ideal is there not as unattainable perfection but to inform the present, to underline what we must attend to, and to help in

> locating what obstructs the realization of the ideal. An ideal locates the territory of interest and concern, points to desired characteristics and qualities of the landscape, and indicates those features that obstruct the growth of the person and of society. The informing of the real by the ideal focuses the work to be done to lessen the distance between the two.[9]

We might say that in the very best educational practice, the real and the ideal mutually "inform" one another. The teacher strives to establish an environment in which students can learn, while also keeping in view, or letting herself be guided by, images of the kind of flourishing adults students can become. She assists a student struggling with reading while holding onto an image of the student as a successful reader. That image strengthens her resolve and fuels her energy. Over the course of a school year, her idealism propels her to undertake steps to "lessen the distance" between the student's current and future status as a reader. In the long run, the teacher's ideal-in-practice boosts and enriches the student's life chances, and, in turn, those of the other people whom the student might one day be in a position to help and to serve. The student might attain such a position only because, long ago and with the help of a teacher, he or she learned how to become a reader.

Teacher educators might interject, perhaps reluctantly and unhappily, that the argument thus far has posed things backwards. In so doing, they would return us to some of the concerns about ideals that I elaborated previously. Teacher educators might point out that for many persons new to teaching, it is not, metaphorically speaking, reality first, and ideals second. Rather, many new candidates enter their professional development programs fired by ideals, in many cases well before they have obtained a sense of the reality of teaching in today's schools and classrooms. To be sure, some candidates take to

the work quickly and successfully. They may have worked with young people before, or they may simply be people who embody idealism wedded to respect for reality. However, teacher educators might emphasize that for many candidates, ideals constitute a mixed blessing. They fuel candidates' enthusiasm. But they may also blind them to pedagogical realities. As a result, when candidates encounter the messiness of working in schools, some feel they have run into a brick wall. In spiritual as much as in practical terms, they do not know how to respond to a mentor teacher who does not share their ideals, to students who do not love learning like they do, to school schedules that make them feel like Charlie Chaplin on the assembly line, and more. In some cases, teacher candidates succumb to the inevitable disappointment that follows in the wake of punctured ideals. Some leave their programs, or they abandon teaching after a brief stint. Others narrow and harden their sensibilities and just try to get through. They may remain in teaching, but they do so in a cynical or even callous state of mind.

Teacher educators familiar with this portrait might also add another twist to the concerns I discussed previously about the power of ideals to develop their own momentum and to swamp respect for reality. Teacher educators might tell us about the problems and the pain that can ensue from their own ideals as teacher educators. They would have in mind not the sometimes innocent ideals of new candidates referred to above, which might, in fact, be focused and matured through a good preparation program and thoughtful classroom experience. Rather, they would caution their fellow teacher educators about rooting out candidates' own ideals and putting in their place ideals those educators themselves prefer. Unless teacher educators undertake a profoundly sensitive and responsible job of instilling such ideals, they may compromise their graduates' subsequent teaching. Graduates might enter the field well-versed in a particular ideology, but

inadequately prepared for the difficult moral and intellectual task of letting ideals and human realities mutually inform one another.

Tenacious Humility: An Ideal of Personhood

The place of ideals in teaching remains ambiguous and uncertain. However, the analysis undertaken thus far does not rule out the possibility that good teaching can be based on ideals of some kind. Without ideals of human flourishing, the work might be reduced to mere socialization, or to a functionalist fulfillment of externally dictated ends. I believe we can say that, at least in many cases, good teaching reflects an appreciation, on the part of the teacher, for both large and undefinable human possibilities, and for ever-present constraints. This posture does not imply being either stoic or zealous. It need not generate resignation to current pressures to teach in a particular way, nor an arrogant claim that one occupies the moral high ground and go it alone.

"Tenacious humility" might serve as an apt descriptor for this standpoint. Tenacity implies staying the course, not giving up on students or on oneself. Tenacity involves fostering and extending one's sense of agency as teacher. It means expanding and deepening one's person, one's conduct, and one's moral and intellectual sensibility. Humility is also an active rather than passive quality. For many people, or so it seems, humility does not come naturally. It has to be worked at, developed, and refined. For a teacher, humility entails a refusal to treat students as less worthy of being heard than the teacher him- or herself. It means retaining a sense of students' as well as one's own humanity. Humility attests to a grasp on the reality of human differences, institutional constraints, and personal limitations. Tenacity, on the other hand, compels the teacher not to treat those differences, constraints, and limitations as hardened and unchanging.

Tenacious humility helps teachers hold at bay the tempting lure of ideals, theories, and ideologies which purport to "explain" schools and students. Such standpoints can release them from having to deal with complexity and from having to think about, rather than to label, whatever does not fit their outlook. Posed differently, tenacious humility suggests that there can be ideals that reach beyond the vise of any particular hard-and-fast cluster of beliefs. These are ideals of character or personhood. As such an ideal, tenacious humility can motivate a person not to rest on the oars of unexamined belief and expectation. It can fuel a person's willingness to be self-critical. That disposition becomes crucial if an ideology is understood to be a system of ideals and views that is closed to further questioning.[10] I may be dedicated to an ideal or ideology, but, cautions John Wilson, "I may not seriously monitor it in the light of reason. The ideology is something I have, a kind of personal possession or insurance policy; whereas the monitoring is something that I do, not which I own."[11] Part of being tenaciously humble is not falling back upon an idealized or ideological "possession" when pressed to listen, to think, to question, to reconsider, to reexamine.

The project of becoming tenaciously humble does not render a person into a hardened or fixed character. Rather, it illuminates how character or personhood can genuinely emerge and grow, even in the face of any number of societal, cultural, familial, or psychological constraints and forces. Like all ideals, tenacious humility is not attainable in any final or penultimate sense. In metaphorical terms, it is always receding, always just over the horizon no matter how much one strives to realize it in practice. Nonetheless, as an ideal it can, as Cuffaro puts it, "inform" the present. It can position a teacher to think, to feel, and to work in imaginative ways he or she might otherwise not even realize are possible.

Tenacious humility operates as what Dorothy Emmet calls a "regulative ideal," a concept she borrows from Kant but which she extends beyond his usage. According to Emmet, a regulative ideal helps set a direction for conduct or for a given practice. It steers persons away from settling for half-measures or surrogates. While a regulative ideal is not realizable "in particular instances," Emmet writes, it can help set a standard for thought and action.[12] She clarifies the two central terms: the "ideal aspect" gives an orientation to an endeavor or mode of conduct, while the "regulative aspect" guides the actual approach.[13] In other words, a regulative ideal describes both a destination and how to conduct oneself in striving to reach it. A regulative ideal is a guide-in-practice. Moreover, it is dynamic. "The ideal is not sufficiently specific to define the final objective," Emmet claims, "but we can know enough about it in general to indicate a progression."[14] This is accomplished, she points out, by learning more and more about the nature of the ideal as one moves toward it.

For teachers, the ideal aspect of tenacious humility gives an orientation to their thought and imagination, while the regulative aspect helps guide their concrete approach in the classroom. The ideal aspect, captured in the root terms tenacity and humility, helps them ponder the persons and teachers they are becoming. That same aspect merges with a regulative dimension, as the ideal helps them to plan for and to participate in classroom life in attentive, responsive ways that support students' and their own growth. Teachers do not need a fixed image of tenacious humility, nor a preset plan of action for realizing it in practice. How could they, one might ask, when understanding the nature and meaning of the ideal takes time and experience (and seems always to leave many questions unanswered)? How could teachers spell out an airtight protocol for self-development when they do not know how each group of new students will respond to their curriculum and to

each other? Tenacious humility emerges through everyday conduct in teaching. Teachers can learn more and more about the nature of the ideal, and how to bring it into being, as they engage the terms of the practice.

Conclusion: Ideals and the Practice of Teaching

Many serious-minded teachers appear to guide their work by ideals such as fueling societal betterment, producing caring persons, and equipping students for a good life. These are big, broad ideals, familiar and, one could argue, compelling. But the critics who worry about "big" ideals help us appreciate the dangers of heeding them unchecked by a sense of reality and responsibility. Ideals can become ideological or doctrinaire, and can lead teachers away from their educational obligations and cause them to treat their students, and perhaps themselves, as merely a means to an end. Moreover, a purely personal ideal may mirror all the dangers of a purely impersonal ideology. An ideal that is subjectively sufficient may be wanting in terms of the objective or nondiscretionary demands of the practice of teaching, such as the need to teach rather than to intimidate, indoctrinate, or coerce students.[15]

Tenacious humility describes an ideal disposition, a moral ideal of character or personhood. Its pursuit constitutes a quest to become a better person and teacher. This project of self-improvement differs from self-absorption. Eliot reminds us of the dangers of the latter: "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self."[16] Striving to be tenaciously humble positions teachers to be outward- rather than merely inward-looking. The quest can motivate them to see students for who they are, to listen and question and think with them, rather than to see them solely through the lens or the

terms of a big ideal. This orientation will not prevent teachers from making errors and mistakes. But it will enable them to learn from their mistakes and to stay the course. Tenacious humility becomes a durable, humanizing ideal that can guide both big ideals and inner reflection, keeping them in the service of teaching and learning.

Footnotes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem* (J. O'Neill, Trans.) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), xxiv, passim.

2. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1985), 668.

3. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 16-20, passim.

4. See Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, *Turning the Soul: Teaching Through Conversation in the High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Annette Henry, *Taking Back Control: African Canadian Women Teachers' Lives and Practices* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); and Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

5. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 475-477, passim.

6. Ibid., 476. For a comparable analysis, see Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

7. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

8. See, for example, Miriam Ben-Peretz, *Learning from Experience: Memory and the Teacher's Account of Teaching* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); Roberta M. Cohen, *A Lifetime of Teaching: Portraits of Five Veteran High School Teachers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991); Michele Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York: The New Press, 1997); David T. Hansen, *The Call to Teach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995); Susan M. Johnson, *Teachers at Work: Achieving Success in Our Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

9. Harriet K. Cuffaro, *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 100.

10. Eva T. H. Brann, *Paradoxes of education in a republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 39.

11. John Wilson, "Seriousness and the Foundations of Education," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 2 (1998): 145.

12. Dorothy Emmet, *The Role of the Unrealisable: A Study in Regulative Ideals* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 2.

13. Ibid., 9.

14. Ibid., 9.

15. Karl Hostetler provides a useful example of the problems that can arise when a teacher's personal ideals seem to interfere with carrying out the tasks that accompany the role. See his *Ethical Judgment in Teaching* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), 74-105.

16. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 456.